



Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac

USS POTOMAC MINI-HISTORY¹

BY W. ABERNATHY

The Vessel's History Summarized



Her years as FDR's "Floating White House"

The ship was originally launched in 1934 as the 165-foot long U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Electra*. She cruised the Atlantic coast a little more than a year before she was acquired by the U.S. Navy as the presidential yacht for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and renamed the *USS Potomac* in 1936 replacing the previous presidential yacht, *USS Sequoia*. Washington D.C. was designated as her home port.

FDR was never comfortable on the smaller and more eloquent *USS Sequoia*, a wooden hull vessel that posed a fire risk, particularly in the mind of the president. Steel hulled, austere and more business-like, the *USS Electra* seemed a more proper yacht for a president leading his country out of the worst economic depression in U.S. history.

Modifications to become the presidential yacht included a hand-operated elevator concealed in the "false" after smokestack that connected to the wardroom and his private quarters and allowed the

¹Source "The Presidential Yacht Potomac by Capt. William Jaffee



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president to almost magically appear on one deck or the other. Sometime before her first cruise an antiaircraft machine gun was installed. Also included was a stainless steel bathtub for the president, an almost unheard of addition for a navy ship. In keeping with Navy tradition, the yacht was painted battleship grey with the presidential seal on the forward bulkhead of the bridge.

Her inaugural cruise with FDR as the "Floating White House" was a week-long Bahamas fishing trip including a press conference in Nassau Harbor. President Roosevelt quickly made the Potomac an important part of his routine. Weekend cruises soon became the norm with a varying guest list of advisers and friends, except Harry L. Hopkins, the presidential adviser, who was almost always on board with the president. The objectives of the cruises were "fishing, rest and escape from the Washington heat." Fishing trips off the Virginia coast were frequent and the signed invitations to dockside parties and official state receptions held aboard the Potomac were highly prized among the capital's upper society. He spent so much time on the yacht that a popular joke claimed he would have lived aboard full time if he didn't already have a lifetime lease on the White House.

Some of the president's famed "fireside chats" and speeches were broadcast from the vessel's radio room including on March 29, 1941, the last of Roosevelt's Jackson Day dinner addresses was delivered from the saloon of the Potomac. "I am sitting," he said, "in the little cabin of the little ship Potomac, in the harbor of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, after a day on sunshine in the Gulf Stream... I try to get away a couple of times a year on these short trips on saltwater. So there is a chance for a bit of sunshine or a wetted line, or a biography or a detective story or a nap after lunch. Above all, there is the opportunity for thinking things through, for differentiating between principles and methods, between the really big things of life and those things of the moment which may seem all important today and forgotten by the world in a month."

In August 1941, the Potomac was the vehicle for a dramatic ruse that culminated in an agreement that altered the course of the nation. FDR wrote his mother: "We go on board the Potomac at New London at 7 tonight and cruise away from all newspapermen and photographers, and I hope to be gone 10 days." A fishing trip to Cape Cod was announced and the Potomac sailed up the Cape Cod Canal as the usual crowds lined the banks to cheer the president. They thought they saw him again when the Potomac later retraced her course through the canal, but the man in the cape, cigarette holder between his teeth titled at a jaunty angle waving at the crowds on both sides of the canal was a Secret Service Agent. The president had transferred in the night to the Flagship USS Augusta to rendezvous with Churchill arriving on the HMS Prince of Wales off Newfoundland. The American president had "disappeared" from the American people for three days while he discussed and executed the Atlantic Charter with Churchill foraging the alliance that would win World War II.

The ship log of guests on board includes King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of England, Crown Princess Martha of Norway, Crown Prince Gustav of Sweden, Prince Karl of Sweden, Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands, James Forrestal, Vice President Alben W. Barkley, Cordell Hull, Harry Hopkins, Samuel Rosenman, Harold Ickes, Col. Edwin M. Watson, Dr. Ross McIntire, Henry Morgenthau, Francis Perkins and the Roosevelt family, including Eleanor and his mother. We know from crew accounts that Fala, the most photographed dog in America, was also a frequent guest.



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After the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the President declared war on the same day, the recreational use of the ship declined. In 1943, FDR used her for another secret trip, this time to connect with the battleship USS Iowa in Chesapeake Bay going and coming to the "Big Three" conference in Tehran, where he and Winston Churchill met with Joseph Stalin for the first time and committed to the Normandy Invasion in mid-1944 (Operation Overlord).

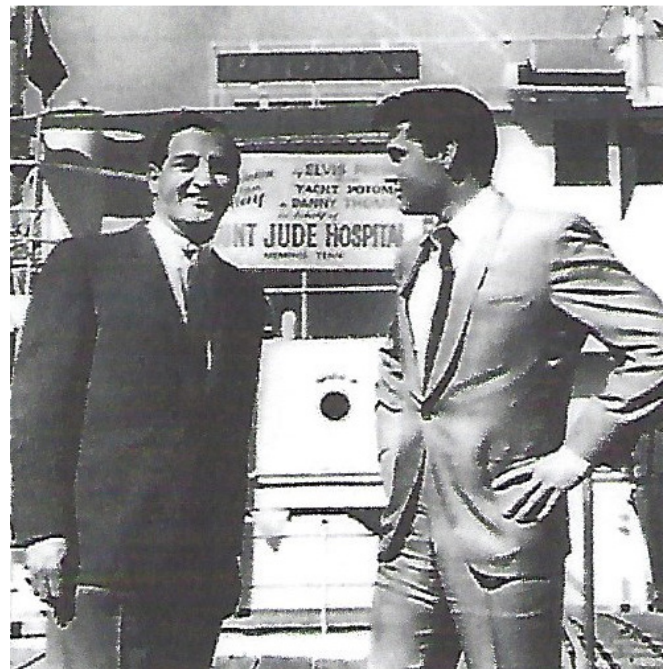
With Roosevelt's death in 1945, the yacht fell into disuse. President Truman simply wasn't interested in her. Replaced by the Williamsburg, she was decommissioned Nov. 18, 1945 and returned to the Coast Guard five days later.

USS Potomac after Franklin D. Roosevelt

She was transferred back to the Coast Guard and was commissioned as the USCG Potomac in January of 1946 but shortly thereafter was decommissioned and turned over to the Tidewaters Fishing Commission of the State of Maryland. On July 16, 1946, the United States Maritime Commission sold the Potomac to the State of Maryland for \$10. She was now a governor's yacht. The yacht was berthed at Cambridge, Maryland, on the east shore of Chesapeake Bay. Her typical itinerary included cruises for the governor and his party from Annapolis. She also assisted vessels in distress. Then in 1958, she had an accident with the dredge Arlington in the Potomac river running her propellers across an un-lowered dredge cable sustaining damage to her propellers and a rudder post. Shortly, thereafter, the State of Maryland began looking for purchasers.

Purchased by Warren G. Toone, the Potomac now pointed her bow toward the Caribbean. Her announced new service would be between the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico but there is scant record of any such service. On October 1961 she was tied to a pier in Bridgetown, Barbados, where she languished unrepared and unseaworthy. Harbor authorities decided to sell her at public auction to satisfy creditors.

Hydro-Capital, Inc., a Newport, California, recreational business firm, bought her in March 1962 with a plan to make the yacht an attraction at the Seattle World's Fair. After an expensive and problem fraught repair effort, the Potomac was deemed seaworthy enough to make the 4,800 miles trip. An engine failed on the first 200 miles but she proceeded on one engine to San Diego and then Long Beach. Once there, Hydro-Capital decided they had enough. The Seattle Word's Fair was over.





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She was auctioned again on Jan. 30, 1964, when she was purchased for \$55,000 by the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley, to "keep it from winding up in a junk heap." He intended giving the Potomac to The National Foundation-March of Dimes with the thought that the Potomac would be preserved as a national monument to FDR's presidency. The foundation politely refused Elvis' offered gift after investigating the expenses necessary for the upkeep of the yacht. Elvis then offered her to the Miami Seventh Coast Guard Auxiliary. They accepted but it was learned that the Auxiliary planned to sell the ship for scrap and use the money to build a clubhouse. Coast Guard headquarters in Washington nixed the Auxiliary's plans. Plans then evolved to give the yacht to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, a favorite charity of Elvis and Colonel Parker, his manager. February 3, 1964 was set as the day to "hand over the keys" to Danny Thomas, founder and key fundraiser for the hospital. On February 3, Elvis arrived for the presentation setting foot on the Potomac for the first and only time together with Danny Thomas and several members of Elvis' "Memphis Mafia." With much fanfare, the Potomac became the property of St. Jude's Hospital. They planned to relocate the ship to Memphis and make her a floating restaurant. Then came the realization of the expenses to move the ship to Memphis. Danny Thomas advised the hospital to sell the yacht saying, "St. Jude is in the hospital business not the boat business."

Presley's attorneys arranged a sale to Marie Pagliasso, partial heir to the \$2.2 million estate left by Hubert "Dutch" Leonard, a Boston Red Sox pitcher and personal friend of FDR. She arranged a loan guaranteed by a private firm owned by Carton Taylor. An ownership group was formed that included Kenneth C. "Red" Tressler. The yacht was in poor condition and the group of would be investors including Tressler pulled-out leaving Ms Pagliasso as the sole-owner.

Four years went by. The Potomac was still at Marina del Ray continuing to deteriorate. When Ms Pagliasso died in 1970 her estate defaulted on the loan and the yacht became the property of Carton Taylor, the man who originally guaranteed her loan. He leased her to Aubrey Phillips, a Long Beach bail bondsman. Under his control the Potomac found her way to Stockton, California.

In August, 1980, Phillips moved the yacht to Pier 26 in San Francisco, allegedly for repairs. In September, she was joined at Pier 26 by the Valkyure, an eighty-five footer, newly arrived from sea with a twenty-one ton load of Columbian marijuana valued at \$40 million on board. Both vessels flew the black and yellow flag of the Crippled Children's Society of American, a bogus charity organization suspected of dealing in drugs. On September 11, 1980, legal authorities moved-in while the contraband cargo was being unloaded from the Valkyure to a truck in the middle of the night. The authorities arrested those present and the two ships. Under maritime law a ship can be arrested as if it were a person.



The Potomac was not carrying any drugs but by flying the Crippled Children's Society banner she was judged to be part of the illegal activities. The Potomac under arrest in the custody of U.S. Customs was moored at Treasure Island Naval Base in San Francisco Bay awaiting outcome of the criminal trial



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scheduled in San Diego. Six months later, on March 18, 1981, at 4 PM, the Potomac's was holed by broken pilings and sank at her berth at Treasure Island in thirty-five feet of water. Television camera crews, radio and print news media reporters swarmed the pier covering the story. The Washington Post carried an eight column headline over its coverage of the incident. The Potomac had reached the lowest point in her career literally and figuratively.

The then legal ownership of the arrested vessel was under challenge concerning whether or not she had been legally seized. On April 15, 1981, U.S. District Judge William Schwarzer decided the ship had been forfeited and should be auctioned as a wasting asset because of its condition.

The auction was set for April 21, 1981, at "high noon" on the waterfront at Jack London Square, Port of Oakland. Terms were strict. Payment was required in full by 4 PM afternoon of the sale; vessel sold "as is" and "where is" and the ship to be moved from the Port pier by sundown that day.

Restoration by a New Owner

On the morning of the sale, the U.S. Customs District Director interrupted a meeting the Port of Oakland director was having in his office overlooking the auction site. The customs director asked if the Port itself would consider making an opening bid. Below his office where the Potomac, being kept afloat by shipboard auxiliary pumps, the auction site was a sea of media representatives. Considering the public interest in the ship, its possible salvage value and the port capacity to house the ship while considering her future, he decided to put in an "opening bid." At noon, he raised his hand with a bid for \$15,000 and minutes later had bought the USS Potomac. Next, the government started removing its rented pumps that were keeping the ship afloat creating the first crisis for its new owner. The Port quickly assumed responsibility for the pumps and the restoration started on its long journey.

The Port set formal goals for the restoration including returning her to full operational capacity on Bay waters to serve as a teaching opportunity for younger generations, particularly school children, about the historical challenges during the Roosevelt era including the Great Depression, the New Deal and World War II.

The Port helped organize the USS Potomac Association as a non-profit corporation to become the ship owner with responsibility for the restoration and its fund raising while the port would continue to provide technical support and home porting. The Association was organized with participation by major maritime companies, organized labor, community leaders and the Roosevelt family. James Roosevelt, the president's oldest son, was the original chairman of the Association and led the restoration fund raising. Volunteer talent included the CEO of American President Lines, the retired president of Kaiser Engineers, and the senior-vice president for marine engineering marine from Matson Navigation Company. Michael Roosevelt, James' son, also joined the board and has served actively and continuously ever since. He is now the board chairman.

James Roosevelt who had gone on many trips with his father on the Potomac said there was nothing he would appreciate more than the restoration of a ship he loved where he relaxed, entertained and worked. At that time there was no national memorial for one of the country's greatest presidents.

A \$2.5 million federal grant to match local contributions was approved after a meeting with President Ronald Reagan and James Roosevelt joined by the Oakland mayor and president of the Oakland port commission in the oval office.

Unlike previous attempts to restore the ship, a disciplined and professional effort was organized by the Potomac association and the Port of Oakland including fund raising and detailed engineering. Donations started to flow-in and volunteer labor including strong support from the California Conservation Corps started the process of not just repairing the Potomac but her complete restoration. The last phase would



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be done in accordance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Historic Ship Preservation Projects. This would ensure the coveted National Historic Landmark status for the vessel.

On September 27, 1983, the renovated and renamed Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Pier at the foot of Clay Street at Jack London Square was dedicated and the Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht USS Potomac took control of the vessel from the Port of Oakland.

Nickum & Spaulding, naval architects in Seattle, won the bid to prepare the restoration design drawings under the eye of Arthur J. Haskell, an association board member and Matson's senior vice-president for engineering and shipbuilding, and Jim McCloud, former president of Kaiser Engineers. Dan Holgate, retired project manager from Crowley Maritime, was hired to oversee the restoration. Colberg Shipyard in Stockton, California won the bid for the restoration. In June 1988, with restoration funds in hand, seven years after she was acquired by the Port of Oakland, the Potomac was placed on a barge to be towed to the shipyard in Stockton. On June 19, 1991, it was announced that the yacht had been designated a National Historic Landmark. Also, in 1991, the Potomac successfully passed sea trials. The Association had \$30,000 left of its original \$3.5 million restoration budget.

For the next five years, the Association focused on developing homeport facilities including a shoreside interpretive center, training docents and working with school districts to develop an effective program that would make the Roosevelt era come alive for modern school children. A challenge was to provide dockside facilities with wheelchair access to the ship.

On Maritime Day, May 20, 1995, after fourteen years of effort and an expenditure of approximately \$5 million in public and private funds, the USS Potomac opened to the public and has operated continuously thereafter except for Coast Guard required dry dockings.

